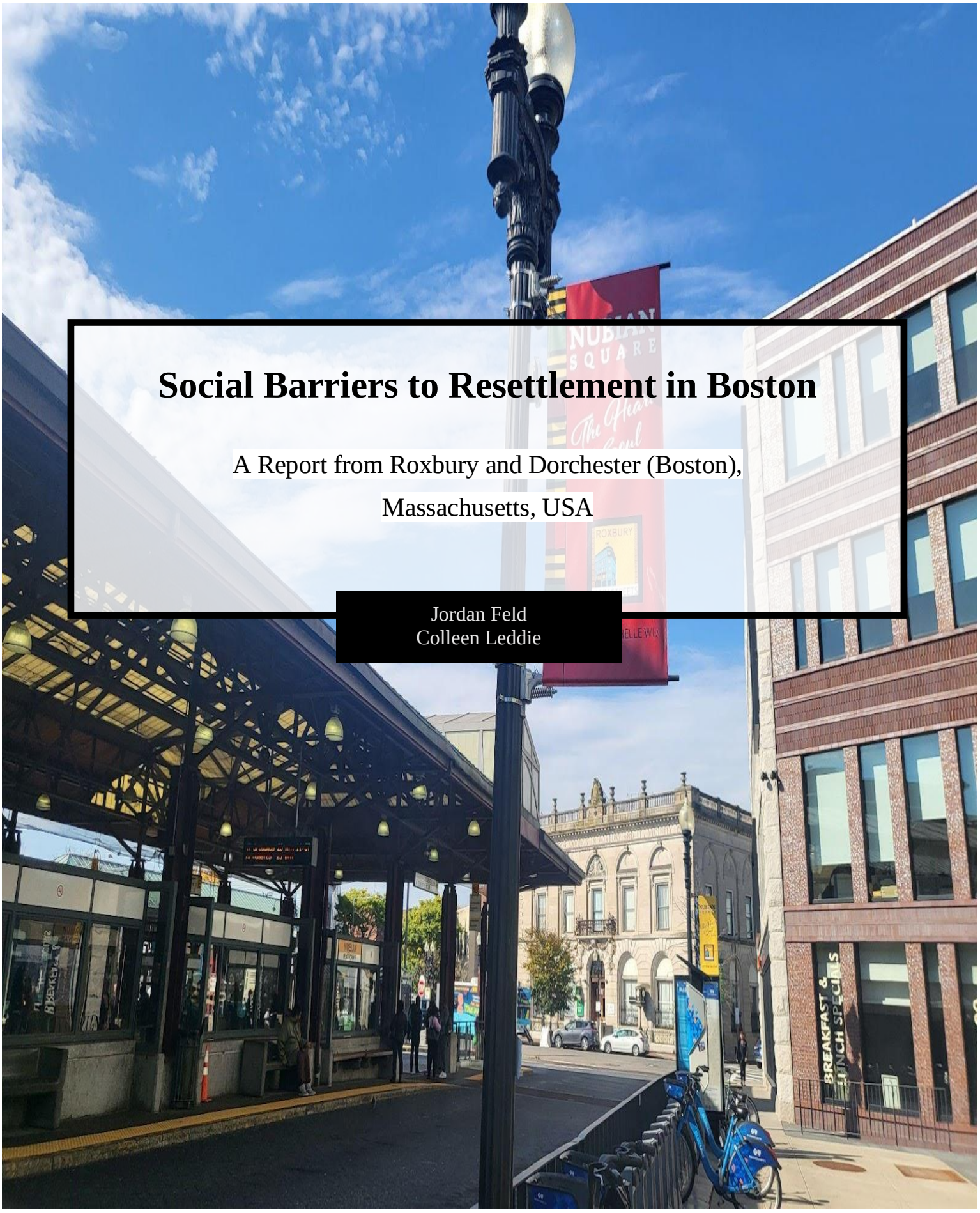

Social Barriers to Resettlement in Boston

A Report from Roxbury and Dorchester (Boston), Massachusetts, USA

Jordan Feld
Colleen Leddie

FLETCHER
HENRY J. LEIR INSTITUTE FOR MIGRATION & HUMAN SECURITY

SOMALI DEVELOPMENT CENTER
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Contents

Cover photo: Nubian Square in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts. Photo credit: report authors.

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Dedicated to the memories of Bruce Schildkraut and James McElhiney.

Introduction

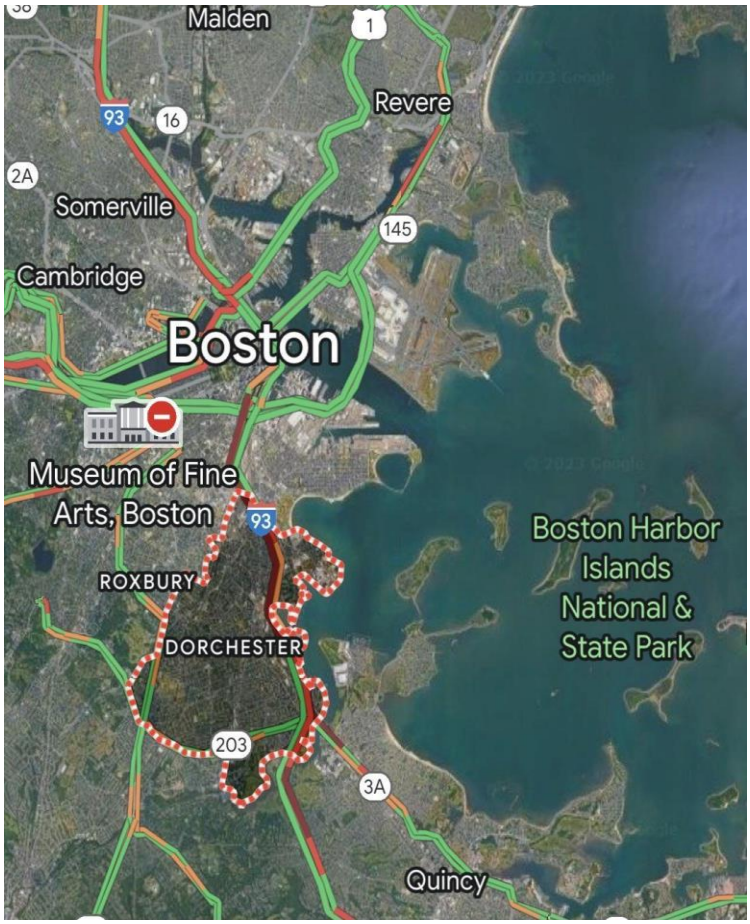

Figure 1: Base map imagery © *Google 2024.*

This case report delves into the diverse lived experiences of East African and Afghan migrants and refugees in Boston, specifically those supported by the Somali Development Center (SDC). We examine the social barriers they experience during their resettlement, especially the lack of transitional housing. The paper also draws on the experience of community leaders, social service representatives, and local government officials.

Since 1996, SDC has supported Somali and other East African immigrants and refugees, and more recently, Humanitarian Parolees arriving from Afghanistan. We are based in Boston, Massachusetts, but serve the Greater Boston area. SDC offers a range of social services aimed at removing barriers and forging pathways toward self-sufficiency and self-empowerment for every migrant seeking assistance. We work with state and local government, community and elected officials, and other refugee organizations to help clients with affordable housing, health services, and language interpretation and translation. SDC also provides legal and citizenship assistance, cultural acclimation, and accessible English education and career-readiness training.

The Authors' Position and Experience

All members of the research team are involved in the SDC's day-to-day operations.

Colleen Leddie has been a Program Coordinator at SDC since 2021. She is a licensed certified social worker and received her Bachelor's Degree in Anthropology from the University of Montana, as well as a Master's Degree in Social Work from Tulane University, and a Master's Degree in Science with Tulane's Disaster Resilience Leadership Academy. Her areas of interest include housing as a public health intervention to explore community resilience.

Jordan Feld has been a Case Manager at SDC since January 2022 and has resided in Boston since 2021. He is pursuing his degree and completing research in Sociology and Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the University of British Columbia. He assists clients with immigration, probate and family court, social security, and general case management.

Ahmad Kharooti is the SDC Afghan Case Manager. Ahmad has a strong drive to assist newly arrived Afghan constituents, having arrived himself as a Humanitarian Parolee on September 5, 2021. Ahmad helps newcomers navigate social adjustment and interpretation services as they begin life in the U.S. He is fluent in Dari, Pashto, Farsi, Urdu, Hindi and English.

Methodology

The report is based on the authors' conversations with five refugees (of whom three were women), eight Afghan Humanitarian Parolees (one was a woman), and four asylum seekers (none were women). We also talked to four community leaders, social service representatives, and local government officials in and near Roxbury and Dorchester. These conversations took place between April-October 2023, and were held at the Somali Development Center and virtually (over Zoom).

Location and Context: Roxbury and Dorchester, Boston, MA

Roxbury and Dorchester are working-class neighborhoods of Boston, where most SDC constituents reside and work. SDC is located in Nubian Square, close to the Roxbury Crossing Train Station. Roxbury is a predominantly and historically Black/African-American neighborhood, populated largely by African Americans, Caribbean Americans, and a growing Latino and Hispanic population. There are 60,705 residents in Roxbury, of which 63% are US-born citizens, 23% are non-US-born citizens, and 14% are non-citizens.[1]

[1] Point2 Roxbury, n.d.

Today, Roxbury is 51% Black, 34% Hispanic and 11% White.[2] The Dominican community is Roxbury's largest immigrant group while Africans constitute a smaller, yet growing, segment of the foreign-born population. Since the 1990s, people from Cape Verde, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Kenya, and Somalia have called Roxbury home. They have established new businesses, restaurants, churches and mosques—such as the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center (ISBCC) which has been a pillar in Boston's Muslim community since 2009. The ISBCC represents over sixty nationalities and supports the integration of newly arrived Afghan humanitarian parolees. In Roxbury, Afghans, alongside African American and Latino residents, have come together to form vibrant community organizations like the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative.[3]

Figure 2: Map of Boston Neighborhoods with Top 10 Countries of Birth for Foreign-Born Population © *Boston Planning and Development Agency 2017.*

Dorchester is Boston's largest neighborhood, with 85,854 residents, of whom 64% are US-born citizens, 23% are non-US-born citizens and 13% are non-citizens.[4] Historically and today, Dorchester reflects Boston's diversity with Cape Verdeans, Hispanics and Vietnamese, as well as Irish, African Americans, and immigrants from the Caribbean.[5] Today Dorchester is 44% Black, 16% Hispanic, 11% Asian and 22% White.[6]

New Arrivals in Massachusetts

In 2022, Massachusetts welcomed 4,359 people of different humanitarian statuses, of which 1,660 (36%) were resettled in Greater Boston/Eastern Massachusetts (see Table 1). The two largest groups were Humanitarian Parolees from Afghanistan (2,102) and Ukraine (754) who together comprised 65% of the total.[7] According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), Humanitarian Parole is granted on a case-by-case basis for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit. Parole is a discretionary decision authorized by the USCIS Humanitarian Affairs Branch. It "allows for temporary lawful presence in the United States" but does not give individuals "immigration status or a path to lawful permanent residence (a Green Card holder) or another lawful immigration status." In other words, parole is not an "admission" or "entry", rather, parolees are treated as applicants for admission.[8]

After the 2021 U.S. military's withdrawal from Afghanistan, President Biden directed the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to lead and coordinate ongoing efforts across the federal government to support vulnerable Afghans, including those who worked alongside the U.S. military in Afghanistan for the past two decades. He initiated Operation Allies Refuge/Operation Allies Welcome in response to the need for rapid evacuation and relocation of such Afghans. As a result, large numbers of Afghan Humanitarian Parolees began arriving in the United States.[9]

[2] BPDA Roxbury, 2019.
[3] Global Boston BC, 2021.
[4] Point2 Dorchester, n.d.
[5] Mitchell, 2017.
[6] BPDA Dorchester, 2017.
[7] Interview with MA-ORI official (Participant 4)
[8] USCIS, 2023
[9] DHS, n.d.

Table 1. Immigration Status of Massachusetts Migrant Arrivals in 2022 Source: Interview with MA-ORI official (Participant 4)	
Refugees–No US Ties	230
Refugees–With US Ties	318
Refugees/Secondary Migrants	11
Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Holders	45
Afghan Humanitarian Parolees	2,102
Ukrainian Humanitarian Parolees	754
Cuban/Haitian Entrants - Primary	377
Cuban/Haitian Entrant - Secondary Migrants	445
Certified Victims of Human Trafficking	6
Asylees	71

Of the remaining 1503 humanitarian entrants, Massachusetts welcomed people from Haiti (13%) and Cuba (2%), as well as Refugee Arrivals from the Democratic Republic of Congo (3%) Guatemala (1%), and 7% from 29 different countries, including El Salvador, Somalia, Sudan, Iraq, Uganda and Moldova. The remaining two percent consisted of asylees, refugee secondary migrants and Certified Victims of Trafficking.[10]

Boston's Housing Crisis

Upon resettlement, many new arrivals lack basic resources for housing security. Facilities hosting new arrivals tend to be limited in space and not equipped to mitigate secondary issues related to refugee resettlement, such as setting up new arrivals with more permanent housing, addressing language barriers, and providing culturally relevant and integrated resources related to education, food, healthcare and mental health services. In August 2023, Massachusetts Governor Maura Healey declared a state of emergency due to rapidly rising numbers of migrant families arriving in the state.[11] Governor Healey

[10] Interview with MA-ORI official (Participant 4)
[11] Mass.gov, 2023.

continues to warn that the state is running out of room to house migrants. While the Mayor's Office of Housing and Housing Stability does not oversee specific housing programs, they are directly involved in citywide housing decisions and solutions. The Office, says the city (and state), has been dealing with a migrant *crisis* for the last year, and the state's emergency shelter system is overwhelmed with families that are both U.S. citizens and migrants.

"This system was designed to help families that are U.S. citizens get safe housing and go from a dangerous situation to a livable situation, get safe, and get their kids in school. Now we are witnessing about 90% Haitian families needing legal assistance and applying for asylum who are in need of help applying for work permits that allow them to leave the system and provide for their families.

We hear their kids have not received formal education in a number of years due to traveling and unsafe situations. The needs for these migrant families are so different from the needs of families who have been in this country, but they are all in the same system which has been less than ideal.

It is a system that has been functioning, they are safe, but the system isn't designed for what it's doing right now."[12]

One official in the Mayor's Office referred to: "*the sheer volume of families entering emergency shelter systems, paired with slower exits of families already living in long-term shelters*." Another said, "*on any given weekend a hotel with 50 units is available, and that with the current crisis, those units are filled up…not to mention the weekday overflow.*" The Mayor's Office emphasizes that "*newly arrived families need resources, namely transitional resources, until they can get on their feet, and especially the education piece of navigating housing systems in high-cost cities. There is an unconscionable expectation that these [newly arrived] families can figure it out.*" As a "right -to-shelter" state, the state leadership strongly believes that resources need to be provided for families to navigate all of these complex hurdles, such as "*language access, expedited work permits, and some sort of triage center where families can be connected immediately with health services and transitional support.*"

Most transitional housing in Boston, and much of Massachusetts, is limited to hotels, homeless shelters, empty college dormitories, and nonprofit organizations. The Office is overwhelmed and lacking in cultural and social resources suitable and necessary for newly arrived migrant families. Many recent arrivals note dissatisfaction with their lengthy hotel stays before finding more permanent housing. One Humanitarian Parolee from Afghanistan described,

"*We understood at the time when we all first arrived by the thousands, it was an emergency situation and it was difficult to accommodate us immediately. But many of us, after waiting months in refugee camps, were then placed in hotels for months. When you're staying at a hotel, you have this feeling that you're homeless, and that makes the future unclear and stressful.*"

We asked the same interviewee how they think the process could be handled differently.

"*They [government/resettlement] should prepare better so that they are ready for other families before they arrive. After 1 week they should be able to find a house. One of my friends stayed in a hotel for 4 months, in a rural town with the nearest grocery store 20-minute walk away, and no transportation. Mentally he and his family were not good. This is not only a housing problem, it affects the mental state of the family. Hopefully now they are better equipped to support newcomers, that they can assign*

[12] Interview with officials at the Mayor's Office of Housing & Housing Stability (Participants 8 & 9)

families to agencies and have everything ready for them, so that once they arrive, they can come directly to their homes with basic necessities ready for them so that they feel like they're home safe."

Another problem is the exorbitant rent prices in Boston. In 2023, the average rent was $2,895 for a one-bedroom apartment and $3,343 for a two-bedroom apartment, making it the third most expensive city in the U.S.[13] Affordable housing stock is overwhelmed and often substandard.

Many people we talked to said their main concern was housing. One Afghan Humanitarian Parolee said, "*the house is small and there are 11 of us living there ... the rent is too high and only my father works. Just imagine 11 people and 1 bathroom. The house is old, the bathroom old. There are pipes and damages in the bathroom which is leaking. We have asked the landlord many times but…a guy came and took a picture, then after that nobody came to fix the problem.*"

This was not an isolated statement. Many migrants at SDC have large family sizes. According to a former Somali-American SDC Case Manager:

"*One of my difficult housing cases was a family of 15. A lot of children, parents, a grandmother and an uncle. Originally this family lived in a shelter. At the time, this family was still having children. Every time this father came to SDC, he would have a new child. The father would say 'Allah [God] will provide.' I would say 'Well let Allah find you a house, then.' The Boston Housing Authority eventually granted them a house, but they couldn't find a house to accommodate 15 people."*

Regarding housing affordability, the National Low Income Housing Coalition reports that an hourly wage of $41.64, at minimum, must be earned during a forty hour work week, consistent with a full fifty-two week yearly period, to afford the Fair Market Rent for a two-bedroom unit, without paying more than 30% of income.[14] Residents in Dorchester make $78,050 annually[15] on average as compared to Roxbury residents who make an annual salary of just $45,300 annually,[16] which is significantly lower than the national average of $75, 149.[17] Most SDC clients work in entry level, minimum wage employment and do not make amounts anything close to these average salaries for these two neighborhoods.

Several SDC clients regretted that they had not been resettled in their first preference location. One male Afghan Humanitarian Parolee explained, "*first we selected Virginia, because it has a large Afghan community, but we were told we would be going to Boston. A lot of my friends selected California, and instead they were sent to Michigan.*" The US government considers household preference of location to some degree, and there is a lottery system of sorts, but not everyone can be located where they prefer. Of course, they are free to move after their initial arrival, but doing so is often complicated. Some clients had no idea what or where Massachusetts was before they were told they would be living there. One male asylee from Afghanistan said that when his family arrived, they tried to find housing near a family member in Melrose, a town just outside Boston. They tried for weeks, to no avail, finding that landlords

[13] Apartment Advisor National Rent Report, 2023.
[14] NLIHC, 2023
[15] Niche.com Inc. 2024. *Dorchester.*
[16] Niche.com Inc. 2024. *Roxbury.*
[17] Ibid.
[18] In Somalia, the Siad Barre government collapsed in the early 1990s, and the ensuing civil war led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of refugees across Africa. A small proportion were eventually resettled in Europe and North America.

were cold and untrusting, and requested financial statements the family did not possess. The resettlement agencies explained they could only help him find a house in Dorchester, because that is where they had connections. This interviewee said,

"*When you arrive here you don't have any credit or a job so you can't obtain housing on your own. You can look all you want, but you are dependent on other people/agencies to vouch for you and find housing for you. It's out of your control.*"

The Somali and Afghan Community of Boston

Boston is a place of refuge for approximately 8,000 Somalis.[18] Not all Somali immigrants came to Boston as refugees; Somalis began migrating to the U.S. as early as the 1970's for work and education. One is Abdirahman Yusuf, who originally came to the US in 1979 on a student visa and is now a citizen, and the Executive Director of the Somali Development Center (SDC) in Roxbury. We asked him where the Somali community is now compared to the 1990s:

> *".. the Somali refugees, being from Africa, were facing the worst barriers for all refugee/immigrant communities that ever came to the US. … they have three barriers: a) they are Black minorities; b) they are linguistic minorities, speaking Somali; and c) they are Muslim."*
>
> - Abdirahman Yusuf, Executive Director of SDC

As the population kept growing in Boston throughout the 1990's, the community had to take matters into their hands. As a result, after many years of organization, and a grant from the Office of Refugees and Immigrants (ORI), SDC was born on November 16th, 1996.

> *"To resettled folks, it seems like they were taken from earth to mars and told to fend for themselves. Language, religion, skin color, it was very strange for them and it took a long process of adjustment…that is why we used to refer to ourselves as cultural brokers who knew both U.S. and Somali cultures and were able to bridge to obtain resources and access for those resettled."*
>
> - Abdirahman Yusuf, Executive Director of SDC

As it is for many resettled refugee groups, life was difficult for the first generation of resettled Somalis in Boston. Needs assessments demonstrated that housing and employment were the biggest issues, even more than education. One study found that 90% of Somali Bostonians have either been homeless or have lived in some form of subsidized housing.[19] Now thirty years later, the Somalis are a well-established community in Boston. According to Mr. Yusuf, some 15% - 20% of Somalis in Boston now own their homes. Many have graduated university and have jobs in business, social services, and law. There are Somali restaurants such as Ashur and Khadija's Express Café, both in Roxbury, less than two minutes away from SDC. The Somali community is a determined diaspora, resisting social barriers against them, and supporting their families back in Somalia, many of whom are dependent on remittances from abroad.

[19] Camacho et al, p. 99.

"I came to SDC needing desperate help. I was in bad shape when I came to SDC, with serious medical and mental health issues. Staff helped me obtain disability (SSI) so that I would have financial support. A big issue for me lately has been housing. Recently, I was unable to make rent payments and was facing eviction due to financial problems and also had a court ordered child support that surpassed my monthly income. Staff helped me resolve these issues. SDC and other nonprofits have been generous to grant me funding and relieve some of my rental arrears so that I have stable housing during this time."

-Former Somali Refugee and SDC Client (Male)

"The first challenge I felt was culture shock because the place I was born [Somalia] is very different from America, with the weather, the language, the culture…America has hundreds of cultures and a lot of people from everywhere. I got the culture shock which is why immediately when I arrived I was looking for a Somali community. I was shocked when I arrived the first day and saw snow. We don't have snow in Africa. It was very cold. But, the social workers, the community for my children, the Somali community, nurses and doctors, all of these communities gave me and my children big help. Then after that I started to come to the Somali community to take English classes."

-Former Somali Refugee and SDC Client (Female)

The SDC also supports many Afghan Humanitarian Parolees and asylum seekers. Since the resettlement of over 80,000 Afghans to the U.S. in 2021, thousands have come to Boston, including a contributor of this case report, Ahmad Kharooti.

"Not only has SDC been a place of community support for myself and my family, but it has also allowed me to use my position as a refugee myself to help the Afghan community myself. Kind of like a liaison. There are very few University educated Afghan refugees in Boston, and not many who speak English. I'm doing what I can at SDC to help people in my community get there too."

-Ahmad Kharooti, Afghan Humanitarian Parolee and SDC Caseworker

"This office is like my second house. Any time I feel like I am having a problem, the first option is to come here and talk. It is a really friendly place. Everyone has good behavior. The first place to ask for help that comes to my mind is this office, it is always there for us."

-SDC Client from Afghanistan, [Pending] Asylum Seeker (Male)

Most Afghan parolees in the U.S. and Boston were evacuated in 2021, following the Taliban takeover of the country. Initially housed temporarily at military bases across the U.S., they were resettled throughout the U.S., including in Boston. Most humanitarian parolees are not entitled to public benefits such as TANF (Cash Assistance) or SNAP (Food Stamps) and Refugee Assistance from the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), and *do not have a direct pathway to lawful permanent residency*.[20] However, for Humanitarian Parolees from Afghanistan, largely as a result of the geopolitical situation that influenced their exodus from Afghanistan, exceptions were made to this rule through legislation. For most, there is still no direct pathway to legal permanent residence as most were paroled for two years. The only Parolees from Afghanistan that are currently able to apply for legal permanent residence

[20] NILC, 2022, Pp. 1-3.

are for Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) holders, i.e. those who assisted the U.S. military with translation. The only option for most Afghan Humanitarian Parolees who wish to become LPRs is to apply for asylum or qualify for another provisional immigration program.

Some Parolees expressed dissatisfaction *with inconsistent support and false promises made by the U.S. government*, connected with social barriers such as financial challenges and insufficient economic resources to start life in the U.S. This is especially disheartening considering their years of service and sacrifice, as many literally risked their lives for the U.S. military.

> *"I was technically employed through the U.S. army under contract. In the US Army, the rules were if you worked with them for 1-2 years, you could receive an HR letter to try to relocate to the U.S. I worked with the U.S. army for 19 years. They never told me why I could not go to the U.S. sooner. My life was constantly at risk. Since I got to the U.S., I've been waiting for more than a year for important documents/special immigrant visa from the army that I was promised. They should have treated me, and especially the people who worked for them, better so that the resettlement was easier. Instead of helping us, they take our money back from us, with taxes, high rent and no jobs."*
>
> -Afghan Humanitarian Parolee and SDC Client (Male)

Several interviewees said they had insufficient time to become established and transition to life in the U.S before resources were discontinued. Key informants were in unanimous agreement that the government should be providing direct support for housing, as well as transitional resources that satisfy their needs. Staff in the Mayor's Office of Housing and Housing Stability emphasized that every major city in the U.S. is managing the admittance of migrants who need physical and mental health services, education, financial assistance and, most emphatically, housing. "*We need to throw a lot of resources at the issue, and it needs a federal response. States are stepping up, but a federal response is needed and necessary*." In the words of Governor Maura Healey, "*It's time for the federal government to step up and do the job that we need them to do*."[21]

For migrants to become integrated successfully into the U.S., they need time. Many interviewees expressed frustrations with their support (or lack thereof). Migrants who arrive through refugee pathways typically receive support for their first ninety days in the U.S. After this period, refugees may be provided with limited cash and medical assistance, as well as short term language, employment, and social services.[22] Migrants who do not have refugee status are unauthorized to work or receive social welfare benefits like health and food stamps until/if their immigration cases are processed. Such a system is not only unfair and inequitable but also unproductive and unsustainable. One Afghan Humanitarian Parolee [Male] who just started paying his rent in full explained,

"*Without subsidized housing I need help. And, in this short amount of time, I am expected to learn English and get a job and fit into a new environment just like that."*

In reality, it takes families upwards of five years to become established and stop needing support, which is when refugees are no longer eligible to receive ORR-funded refugee community services or health promotion services.

[21] Kashinsky, 2023.
[22] National Immigration Forum, p. 6.

We asked one Afghan Humanitarian Parolee [Male] if having an Afghan community in Boston has been helpful for him. He said,

"*Yes, it has been very good. But the community is not that strong, we are struggling through the same thing because we are all new. The Somali community has been here for 30 years. Their community is much stronger. We Afghans are all new. We are trying to get a job, paying rent, paying bills, we are trying to make the community here of our Afghans, but the problem is, we are all new here.*"

Conclusion

The social, economic, and cultural disparities highlighted throughout this case report point to the overwhelming barriers migrants experience during their resettlement. Although refugee resettlement provides safety from acute and immediate danger, it is community relations that give refugees and migrants the support and empathy they need. The Somali Development Center provides social service and cultural support for all Boston's refugee and migrant communities. But housing is a fundamental pillar for everyone, not just refugees and migrants, to live fulfilling lives. Everyone should have a safe, stable and dignified place to live. In fact, Massachusetts provides social safety for its residents, including refugees and migrants, however legislative restructuring is needed to fulfill resource and infrastructure needs, especially housing. We should consider housing models in other parts of the world, such as Norway, where the government guarantees housing and social welfare for its citizens, refugees and migrants. Boston is a rich city, and could potentially provide successful refugee resettlement.

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About the RIT Project

The **Refugees in Towns (RIT)** project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Leir Institute for Human Security at The Fletcher School at Tufts University.

Our goals are twofold

Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

Why now?

The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants,

and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

www.refugeesintowns.net